

Mexico's once-mighty party struggles

The candidate for Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party is far behind ahead of the July 2 vote.

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MEXICO CITY – For most of the 20th century, power and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) were one and the same in Mexico. All the mayors were PRI. All the congressmen. All the senators, governors, presidents.

There was nowhere to go but down. And, starting in 1989 when the first non-PRI governor was elected, that is exactly where the party went.

The PRI lost its absolute majority in Congress in 1997, a result not only of fresh competition, but also of its reputation for corruption, its lack of a clear ideology, and a perception as being out-of-touch, say analysts. In 2000, Mexicans elected Vicente Fox of the conservative National Action Party (PAN), ending 71 years of hand-picked PRI presidents and an era of one-party politics.

Now, the PRI is heading into the July 2 national elections with its presidential candidate Roberto Madrazo trailing in third place and its defectors numerous enough to fill Mexico City's Azteca Stadium twice over. But while many here are wondering whether it's finally over for the biggest party in town, others caution against prematurely predicting the PRI's demise.

"Don't bet on it," says Gabriel Guerra Castellanos, a respected political analyst for the daily Reforma newspaper. "Despite all its shortcomings ... the PRI remains, arguably, the country's only real national party. And its resilience to the changing political landscape is actually remarkable," he says.

At present, the PRI still has the largest bloc of deputies in Congress - 204 out of 500 - and holds 58 of 128 Senate seats. Seventeen of the country's 31

governors are PRI, including in the important state of Mexico, and 70 percent of the country's municipalities are headed by "PRI-istas."

A poll released Wednesday by the Consulta Mitofsky polling firm, shows that while the PRI was expected to lose party seats, it would remain a powerful player. Mr. Madrazo might not win the election, says Pamela Starr, a Latin America analyst with the Eurasia Group, but Mexicans will still give the party enough votes "to sustain a strong PRI presence in the next legislature."

"It would be wrong to rule the PRI out yet," says Martin Olavarrieta, a PRI candidate for Mexico City Assembly. "We have a tremendous structure and a lot of loyal voters. We feel confident about our future."

It does not seem the party's leader could say the same for himself.

For more than a year, Madrazo, a former congressman, senator, and governor whose father was also a PRI governor, has been lagging in every national poll. As elections approach, the race between front-runners Andrés Manuel López Obrador, from the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), and PAN candidate Felipe Calderón, is tightening. But Madrazo's fate seems a sure thing.

"I am a 'PRI-ista,' now and forever," says Jesús Jimenez, a taco vendor in Mexico City. "But someone in the PRI messed us up when they chose Madrazo."

Madrazo's poor showing in two national debates, his faltering in the polls, and his authoritarian management style, has created major rifts within the PRI, say analysts. In recent weeks, three prominent PRI Senators - Manuel Bartlett, Oscar Cantón, and Genaro Borrego Estrada - have all come out and endorsed other candidates.

But even Mr. Borrego, a 30-year PRI veteran and former party president, who endorsed Calderón last week and quit the party, says the PRI's malaise goes beyond Madrazo.

"We are an unpopular party and I am sure we will not triumph on July 2, but it's not all because of Madrazo," says Borrego. "It's a problem within the party, and Madrazo has aggravated it." The PRI, says Borrego, has been

unable to define itself in the period of multiparty politics. "We need radical reform and a new definition of what the party should be."

Formed in the 1920s after the Mexican Revolution, the PRI historically focused on maintaining stability and remaining in power - not on ideology. It was a party founded on beliefs diverse enough to produce left-leaning President Lazaro Cardenas who nationalized the oil industry in the 1930s and conservative President Miguel Aleman, who filled his cabinet with businessmen in the late 1940s.

Since being voted out of power six years ago, the PRI has come to define itself mainly as what it is not. "We are not the intolerant right-wing or radical like the PAN, and we are also not populist and violent like the leftists in the PRD," says Mr. Olavarrieta. "We are in the center. We represent prudence, maturity, and responsibility."

But such a definition is not one to get voters up and cheering. "Madrazo says he will bring us millions of new jobs - but how? What is their platform?" asks Alberto Barajas, a security guard in Mexico City. "I understand they are not the other parties. But who are they?"

Over its long rule, the PRI's reputation for corruption and cronyism left it with an accumulated image problem. "[Corruption] comes with holding office here, and none of the parties can claim the mantle of totally clean government," says Mr. Guerra. "But the perception is that the PRI is the worst."

In addition, while the PRI does have many young members, its faithful are often called dinosaurs.

The future of the party, says Borrego, will depend on how well it can reinvent itself. "The day after elections, there will be a battle between the various factions: the pragmatists who want to restructure, the idealists who want a whole new party, and the nostalgics who want the old party," he predicts.

"What is needed is a fresh reformer to jump on the locomotive and steer it away from the old way of doing politics," adds Guerra. "But there will be a struggle before this can happen."